

## Degrees of separation: informal social protection, relatedness and migration in Biswanath, Bangladesh

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**Degrees of Separation : Informal social protection, relatedness and migration in Biswanath, Bangladesh**

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**Degrees of Separation: Informal social protection, relatedness and migration in  
Biswanath, Bangladesh**

***Abstract***

*This paper argues for a more precise and context specific understanding of mechanisms of ‘informal social protection’ in Bangladesh. The context is a ‘Londoni’ village in Sylhet which has high levels of internal and overseas migration. The economic boom caused by the latter provides important employment opportunities for people from much poorer areas of Bangladesh, who have moved into the area. Yet as our findings show, the extent to which the poor can call upon the help and protection of rich overseas migrants depends upon the degree of closeness to, or separation from, them. This is marked both through real and fictive kinship as well as geography: those that come from nearby become ‘our own poor’, whereas those from further away are treated as ‘outsiders’, not qualifying for significant ‘help’. As the paper argues, access to hierarchically ordered places is vital for the sustainability of precarious livelihoods. Yet whilst geographical movement is an important survival strategy for the poor, it is only when social relations are established with wealthy patrons that it can be said to contribute to informal social protection.*

**Introduction**

It is over ten years since Mr Miah has been in Jalalgaon, the Sylheti village near Biswanath where he grew up. Now that he has returned with his British based family for a visit, he is spending the money earned from his British restaurant business with enthusiasm. First, there’s the construction of a *pucca* (stone) road,

leading from the main road to his home, plus the acquisition of an electricity generator so that his family can enjoy the comforts of air conditioning. This is followed by a lavish birthday party, held for his son. Since birthdays are not normally celebrated in rural Bangladesh, the event signals the family's sophistication, as well as their wealth. For the party the rooms of Mr Miah's impressive new house are filled with hired banquet chairs and tables and a magnificent lunch held for over four hundred people, including the inhabitants of the village's various 'colonies' (slum type housing for incoming labourers). Left over food is distributed amongst the colony children. A few weeks later, another party is held to celebrate the circumcision of Mr Miah's two sons and nephew. This time the feast takes place in the buildings of a youth club which Mr Miah helped to fund. Again, along with about three hundred of Mr Miah's relatives and neighbours, colony people are invited to the party and the remains from the mountains of rice and chicken served at the lunch distributed amongst them. The speeches given by local politicians in Mr Miah's honour are a highlight of the event; in them, the *Londoni* (British) migrants are both praised for the assistance that they have sent from Britain and urged not to forget their Bangladeshi brethren.

A few months later, it is Eid and a total of fifty seven cattle are slaughtered by prosperous *Londoni* households in Jalalgaon. Each animal costs around 20 000 taka (approximately £165; as we shall see, this is considerably more than most labourers in Jalalgaon earn in a year). Some households spend upwards of 100 000 taka (1) (around £800). As is the custom in Bangladesh, the remains of the animals are distributed to the poor, who move from house to house, collecting ever larger bundles of meat. Clothes are distributed too: wealthy *Londoni* households give away a huge number of saris and lungis, not only to their poorer kin, but also to the impoverished

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3 and non-related people who live in the village's colonies. It is an impressive display  
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5 of charity: conspicuous consumption on a vast scale, generating religious merit as  
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7 well as social status.  
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12 From this brief vignette of the largess of returnee Londonis, it would seem that  
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14 there can only be advantages for poorer people when money flows from Britain to  
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16 Sylhet. Given the duty of care that Bengali Muslims have to their 'own poor'  
17  
18 (idealised in the notion of *jakat*: alms giving), the help provided by Londoni families  
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20 in the guise of financial support, the distribution of food and clothing at ritual  
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22 occasions, shelter, employment and access to land is an important dimension of the  
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24 livelihoods of some of the most vulnerable people in the village. In times of crisis -  
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26 flooding, illness, or one of the many shocks that the vulnerable in Bangladesh  
27  
28 habitually face - such assistance may make the difference between survival and  
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30 catastrophe. For households who do not own assets and have no access to foreign  
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32 wages, their relationships to wealthier others are often the only form of insurance they  
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34 have against total destitution.  
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41 In contrast to formal institutional support given by the state or NGOs (2), these  
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43 relationships and the networks that they involve might be described as 'informal  
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45 protective mechanisms' (c.f. Sabates-Wheeler and Waite, 2003: 17), or 'informal  
46  
47 safety nets' (Kabeer, 2002: 5). Other analysts simply gloss them as 'social capital'(3).  
48  
49 Yet whilst generalised discussions of informal social protection provide an  
50  
51 informative framework for consideration of pro-poor policy, they do not tend to  
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53 situate such relationships within the wider political economies in which they are  
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55 embedded. Within the context of rural Bangladesh, informal social protection is  
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57 carried out through patron client relations, in which better-off patrons provide 'help'  
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for their poorer clients, but in doing so are in a structural position of power over them. As Geof Wood has pointed out, in this context informal social protection invariably involves: ‘cultural and moral dimensions of hierarchy and reciprocity’ (Wood, 2005: 13). Indeed, whilst often key to survival, informal social protection comes at a cost: in return for the *shahajo* (help) of richer patrons, the poor have a variety of economic and political obligations, providing a constant supply of ready labour, political support and other services which are rarely made explicit (Gardner, 1995). It is this that Wood has termed ‘perverse social capital’, a system of complex, overlapping obligations and reciprocity which is a key social resource for the poor, and which, contrary to most theories of social capital, has a positive correlation with the existence of poverty (Wood, 2005).

In Jalalgaon, place and the patronage relationships which provide informal social protection for the poor are symbiotically interrelated: the extent to which one can access ‘help’ is partly determined by where one comes from. In turn patronage, established by degrees of social or geographical closeness, helps determine peoples’ access to places which can provide alternative livelihoods for them. In what follows I shall therefore describe not only the extent to which ‘the poor’ can and do receive ‘*shahajo*’ from wealthy Londoni households, but also the political geography of such assistance. As we shall see, patronage involves both a vertical relationship across economic class (4) and a relationship between unequally valued places, both within and beyond Bangladesh. Within this geography of power, people from poorer areas are dependent upon resource rich locations which provide employment and business opportunities as well as the possibility of informal and sometimes formal social protection.

In Biswanath the search for livelihood security takes place at all geographical and economic levels. This includes the global movement of better-off migrants to countries such as the U.K, (or, for the less successful, the Gulf), the migration within Bangladesh of the very poor from economically marginal regions to the ‘boom’ areas such as Biswanath, and the localised seasonal migration of labourers within Greater Sylhet, who move between districts in order to supplement agrarian livelihoods. At the top of the global hierarchy is the U.K, where one can both find work and the protection of the Welfare State. At the bottom are distant regions of Bangladesh in which livelihoods often fail, forcing their inhabitants to travel to new places in order to survive. To this extent, the account that follows offers an ethnographic example of how economic inequality between places in the ‘World System’, (Wallerstein, 1979; 2004) exists not only in formal labour markets and inter-state relations, but is reflected and reproduced at local levels, both in the shifting relationships between people and the social institutions and moralities in which they participate.

Within this context activities and exchanges that might be described as ‘informal social protection’ exist on a continuum. This involves, at one end, the generalised charity of ritual distributions that are described at the start of the paper and which the poor can avail, no matter how many degrees of separation exist between them and their donors. At the other are loans or donations that pay for migration to the Gulf, or to cover emergency medical costs and which are generally only available to those who are ‘related’ either through kinship or geographical closeness. In my use of the term ‘informal social protection’ I therefore include any form of assistance given from one party to another, which acts as a ‘safety net’ for

those struggling with insecure incomes and livelihoods. Within this definition I do *not* include the wider economic opportunities that boost the livelihoods of the poor.

Whilst, as we shall see, the employment opportunities provided by wealthy ‘Londoni’ areas provide an alternative source of income for people whose livelihoods are no longer sustainable (and to that extent act as an economic ‘safety net’) I believe that to include this in the definition of informal social protection endangers the term of becoming overly baggy.

\*

The research on which the paper is based involved a year long study of a *Londoni* village (which for reasons of confidentiality we shall call Jalalgaon) in Biswanath Thana, Greater Sylhet (5). The village is located in the heart of Biswanath, a booming Londoni area only twenty minutes by bus from Sylhet Town. Our main objective in undertaking the research was to understand the intersecting dynamics of internal and overseas migration in the village. In doing this we hoped to explore the effects of long term migration to Britain on poverty in the area. We were particularly interested in conducting research amongst the many incomers to the village: the inhabitants of its various ‘colonies’, male and female labourers working on both a permanent and temporary basis, and an array of itinerant and seasonal in-migrants, many of whom were escaping desperate poverty in other regions of Bangladesh (6). Before returning to Biswanath and the central themes of the paper, what follows involves a brief background on the history of migration in Sylhet.



**On the Move in Sylhet**

As Tasneem Siddiqui points out, migration has been a livelihood strategy of East Bengalis for many centuries (2003). Indeed, the territory of what in the colonial period was East Bengal, in 1947 became East Pakistan and only since the War of Independence in 1971 has been known as Bangladesh has always been characterised by high degrees of fluidity, both within and across its shifting political borders. From pre-colonial times migrants from the west settled the highly fertile but often waterlogged lands of the east, whilst other historical evidence points to movement in the other direction, a continual flow of people, irrespective of national borders (Van Schendel: 2005). These constant, cross cutting migrations are both a result of the region’s turbulent history, and its turbulent environment, in which floods and cyclones mean that ‘belonging’ can never be guaranteed. Ranabir Samaddar writes movingly that the country is: ‘an insecure environment, inhabited by insecure families.’ Such families dream constantly of escaping insecurity. As Samaddar continues: ‘This dream has made Bangladesh a land of fast footed people, people who would not accept the loss of their dream, who would move on to newer and newer lands ....’ (1999: 83-87)

Today, these fast footed people are moving both internally (see, for example, Afsar, 2000; Seeley, 2005, Van Schendel, 2005) and overseas, predominantly to the Gulf and to South East Asia (see, for example, Abrar, 2000; Siddiqui, 2003; Mahmud 1991; Gardner 1995). The scale of this movement is vast; as Siddiqui reports, from 1976- 2002 official figures show that over three million Bangladeshis migrated overseas, mostly on short term contracts (7). Whilst some are middle class professionals, the vast majority migrate as wage labourers, often inhabiting the most vulnerable and lowly paid sectors of the international labour market. Many more

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3 move illegally, and are thus not captured by official statistics. These migrants take  
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5 huge risks in their attempts to access foreign remittances, and many are either caught  
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7 and deported before they have a chance to earn, or are cheated by unscrupulous  
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9 brokers.  
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13 In Sylhet, international migration has a distinct character. Whilst many men  
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15 from the district have migrated to the Middle East, far more influential has been the  
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17 movement of people from particular areas to Britain. Indeed, approximately 95% of  
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19 the British Bengali population is Sylheti in origin. From the Nineteenth Century  
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21 onwards, Sylhetis worked on British ships leaving from Calcutta as *lascars* (sailors).  
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23 Some of these men ended up in the Docks of East London, where they jumped ship  
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25 and searched for new livelihoods in London (for further details of this period, see  
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27 Adams, 1987; Chowdhury, 1993; Gardner, 1995 and 2002).  
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32 There is no single reason why Sylhetis rather than other Bengali groups  
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34 dominated ship work, or why it was they, rather than others who, many years later,  
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36 were able to monopolise the 'labour voucher' system which brought people from ex  
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38 colonial territories to work in post war Britain. One factor may have been the colonial  
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40 system of land administration. Whilst over much of Bengal, *zamindars* (landlords,  
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42 who paid taxes directly to the British) owned large tracts of land which were worked  
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44 upon by their tenants (*raiyat*), until 1947 Sylhet was administered as part of Assam.  
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46 Here, in contrast to the *zamindari* system, many smaller farmers were independent  
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48 owner occupiers of land (*taluk dar*) rather than tenants on the large estates owned by  
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50 *zamindars*. Possibly this contributed both to an entrepreneurial spirit as well as the  
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52 capital reserves required to travel to Calcutta in search of ship work. Another factor  
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54 may be the riverine geography of the region, which produced a population  
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56 experienced in boats and shipping. Crucially too, particular individuals may have  
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dominated the recruitment of labour, thus leading to a ‘chain’ effect whereby men from particular villages and lineages gained employment through the patronage of their relatives and neighbours. Whatever the reasons, by the time that work permits were being offered by the British government to men from the sub-continent in the 1950s, Sylhetis were well placed to gain maximum advantage. With a small but rapidly growing network of men already living in Britain, the chain effect continued. Such was the demand for the ‘vouchers’ that, as Chowdhury reports, an office of the British High Commission was opened specially in Sylhet (Chowdhury, 1993).

Most of the men who left for Britain were employed in Britain’s heavy industry. In today’s terminology, they were ‘transnationals’ par excellence: they worked and lived in Britain, but returned as often as they could to their villages where they were still heavily involved in social networks of kinship and community. Over the 1970s and into the 1980s conditions started to change. Britain’s heavy industry was in decline and many Sylheti men moved to London to seek employment in the garment or restaurant trades. Crucially, a growing number started to bring their wives and children to the United Kingdom (Peach 1996). This shift was partly the result of changing immigration laws, which many rightly feared would soon make primary migration to Britain (without it involving marriage to a British citizen) impossible. It also reflected wider changes in the areas where many Bengalis were settled, in which mosques, shops selling *halal* meat and other community facilities were becoming established. Today, the Bangladeshi population is the youngest and fastest growing in Britain (8).

**Desh Bidesh: The Changing Nature of Transnational Migration**

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Whilst in earlier phases of South Asian movement to Britain it was generally assumed by commentators that settlement within the U.K would lead to a rupture with links with the *desh* (homeland) this has not taken generally place (9). Indeed, as is now widely acknowledged, the journeys of migrants do not end in their new places of settlement. Instead the majority of migrant communities remain connected to their places of origin, through political, cultural and religious links, as well as familial relationships which cut across state boundaries (Gardner and Grillo, 2002; Bryceson and Vourela, 2002). Physically people continue to move between places, not only on journeys to the *desh* carried out by Londonis such as Mr Miah, but also through the continued movement of Sylhetis who are arriving for the first time in the U.K. Rather than being separated, ‘sending’ and ‘receiving’ societies thus remain linked through transnational migration<sup>1</sup>; to this extent, *desh* and *bidesh* (home and abroad) are merely different places within the same social and economic sphere (Gardner, 1993).

One of the main ways in which these links between Biswanath and the U.K are reproduced is through marriage. Indeed, if not classed as a ‘family dependent’, it is extremely difficult for Bangladeshi citizens to obtain entry visas to Britain from Sylhet: figures from the British High Commission in Dhaka show that of the Bangladeshis seeking work permits over 2005-6, ninety per cent were from Sylhet and the vast majority were refused (10). Marriage is thus one of the few routes left. Yet whilst in the 1970s and 1980s it was mostly wives who travelled to the U.K to join their husbands, today almost as many men apply for settlement visas to join their British based wives. Foreign Office figures show that in 2005, 1530 settlement visas were granted to Bangladeshi grooms (with 330 refused), in contrast to 2133 issued to brides (with 590 refused). These figures have remained relatively stable since

2001(11). A 2004 Report from the Home Office (12) cites a rise of 14% of husbands admitted from the Indian sub-continent since 2003, compared to a rise of 12% of wives.

Whilst these marriages keep villages such as Jalalgaon connected to the U.K, the nature of the transnational relationship is neither stable nor equal. Although British based Sylhetis are, to a certain extent, dependent upon their *deshi* relatives for looking after their houses and land, and have strong moralities of duty and care towards them, it is those in the *desh* who are more dependent upon their Londoni brethren, and who have the most to lose if the relationship is not maintained, for the flow of *economic* resources goes only one way. As Katherine Charsley has therefore described in her work amongst British Pakistanis, whilst transnational marriages are advantageous for both sides, there can sometimes be intense pressure from Pakistan based relatives on those in the U.K to provide marriage partners for their children, whilst men and women born and bred in Britain are sometimes reluctant to accept partners from Pakistan (2005). Similar observations can be made for Sylhetis (Gardner, 2006).

Indeed, the degree to which second, third, and fourth generations of British Sylhetis will be able (or want) to maintain costly patronage relations with village based dependents is questionable. As research into South Asian diasporic identities shows, it is to new, globally located identities or, in Appadurai's term, 'ethnoscapes' that younger members of the diaspora tend to turn (Appadurai, 1990). Rather than being orientated to the *desh* in the way of their parents and grandparents, young British Asians today are more likely to frame their identities around new cultural forms such as music (Hutnyk and Sharma, 1996), new forms of religiosity and global Islam (Glynn, 2002), or higher education and British business interests (Eade 1994).

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3 Family reunification in the U.K, and the investment of capital in British based  
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5 businesses and property means that few people today send regular remittances to the  
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7 village. Instead, the flow of money into the village is through pensions: formal social  
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9 protection provided by the British state which is paid into the bank accounts of  
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11 returned ‘Londonis’ who are enjoying their retirements in the *desh*. Whilst small by  
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13 British standards, these pensions can be around 10 – 12, 000 taka a month, a vast  
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15 amount of money by local standards (as we shall see, wage rates for labourers are  
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17 around 80- 100 taka a day). These funds are an important source of informal credit  
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19 and capital in the village: the manager of the local branch of the Sonali Bank told us  
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21 that because of the flow of pensions, his bank had only lent out a tiny proportion of  
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23 what it would expect to give as credit in other, non Londoni areas.  
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30 Once this generation of pensioners has died the nature of the transnational  
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32 relationship between places is hard to predict. What does seem clear is that direct  
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34 remittances from household members have been dwindling over the last few decades.  
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36 One family who currently have two sons in Britain bemoaned to me how little they  
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38 now receive. The oldest son, who went to Oldham in the 1970s has stopped remitting  
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40 altogether, whilst his younger brother, recently married to his British based cousin and  
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42 with a young child, can hardly afford to send anything. In Jalalgaon, an elderly  
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44 woman told a similar story: “We are very poor,” she told us. “We took the decision to  
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46 send my son to London because we needed the money. But that was twenty years ago  
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48 and he hasn’t sent us anything for a long time....”  
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53 From this brief background, let us turn to our research context: Jalalgaon  
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55 village.  
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**Jalalgaon Village**

Situated only a few kilometres from Biswanath Town, with its resplendent shopping malls, fast food outlets and multi-storied community centres, Jalalgaon is a ‘Londoni’ village *par excellence*. Alongside the humble single storied houses of non-migrants, the village is filled with the mansions of successful Londonis. These may be up to three storeys high with architectural styles are reminiscent of the housing developments one might find in Dubai or Saudi Arabia. Many have satellite dishes and some have smoked glass windows, an embellishment that until recent years was unseen outside of the U.S or Saudi Arabian consulates in Dhaka. Others have stone aeroplanes adorning their walls and roofs. None of this would be so remarkable were it not for the stark contrast with the rest of rural Bangladesh, in which mud and thatch (*katcha*) houses are the norm. Many of the houses are empty. Others are occupied by caretakers, often poorer relatives of the departed families. During the course of our fieldwork, ten new houses were in the process of being built in the village. Others, such as Mr Miah’s house, became temporarily occupied by a Londoni family, who after a few months returned to the U.K.

As this indicates, the population of the village is in constant flux. Whilst some households have relocated permanently to Britain or only return every few years, a great many more have moved in. These in-migrants consist of far poorer people, attracted by the economic boom caused by overseas migration. During our fieldwork, we counted ninety seven households who identified themselves as ‘insiders’, their families having lived in Jalalgaon for over two or three generations. Of these, thirty four were known locally as ‘Londonis’, meaning that a member had migrated to the U.K. Some were permanently absent in Britain, but others still had members living in

Jalalgaon. The remaining sixty three 'insider' households either had no migratory experience, or had sent members to the Middle East.

In addition to these ninety seven 'insider' households were a great number of other people who had migrated into the area either permanently, or for a more temporary period, and despite living locally are seen as outsiders. On the periphery of the village's homesteads are twenty five 'colonies': thatch, breeze block and tin buildings, reminiscent of urban slum housing, which housed, at the time of our survey, one hundred and forty seven households, a total of seven hundred and fifty people. In addition to this is a population of temporary and permanent labourers, who live largely in the households (or out houses) of insiders, but who may also stay in the colonies. During our fieldwork we counted one hundred and sixty nine labourers who originated from outside the village, living in thirty three 'insider' households. During the harvest and planting seasons this number is boosted by other workers who either temporarily live in the colonies, or are housed by their employers. We shall be returning to these in-migrants later in the paper.

There are other noteworthy features of the village. These include the village's bazaar, which is filled with shops selling not only fruit and vegetables, tea, spices and so on, but also offer mobile phone and internet services, as well as high status goods such as nappies, cosmetics and expensive snacks. Unlike less prosperous villages in which there would only be a dirt track, there are also a high number of metalled roads connecting homesteads and their fields to the main road. These have all been financed by Londoni money, as have many of the schools, health centres and community centres in the region. Strikingly too, many of the fields are bounded by high stone walls. These mark plots of land owned by absent Londonis. They are, quite literally,



claims of entitlement made concrete, and are only found in areas of high out migration to Britain.

A large proportion of the agricultural land in the village is cropped only once a year. This is in contrast with the rest of Bangladesh, where (depending upon local ecology) the land is normally cultivated twice a year (during the *aman* and *boro* rice crops), often combined with a crop of winter vegetables (*rabi*). Some fields are not farmed at all, but lie fallow, awaiting the construction of buildings. Although precise data on land use was difficult to obtain we calculated that approximately twenty acres of land in the centre of the village was, over the twelve months of our fieldwork, not being used for agricultural production but awaiting property development. This indicates another major difference with the rest of rural Bangladesh: only a minority of villagers are dependent upon agriculture for their livelihoods.

**Overseas Migration and Economic Status in Jalalgaon**

To understand the processes that have produced these features, we should consider the relationship between migration and the shifting terrain of economic status in the village over the last fifty or sixty years. Our research did not produce longitudinal data for Biswanath, but its history is likely to be similar to Talukpur, the Londoni village in Nobiganj I studied in the 1980s. Here the pattern of migration to Britain became firmly established in the 1950s-1970s. Not all land owning households sent migrants to Britain, but the majority of the original migrants came from middle income farming households, often with relatives who were *lascars*. Other poorer men with less land took advantage of the ‘chain’ and migrated through the help of neighbours or relatives, who helped cover the initial costs of the journey. Over the 1950s to 1970s, those that hadn’t sent a member to the U.K began to lose land to

those that did, since the periodic shocks and crises that afflict most farming households in rural Bangladesh were not cushioned as they were for the Londonis by foreign earnings. Fierce competition within the village over land meant that these non-migrant households were often forced to sell their plots to Londoni neighbours, who could offer ever higher prices. With their British wages, which, in the Sylheti context amounted to small fortunes, Londoni migrants began to buy up as much land as they could. As competition over the finite amount of land grew, prices began to rise. This meant that within a few decades, those that did not have access to foreign wages were increasingly unable to afford local land (13). By now, however, the doors to Britain were closing. Without being a dependent of a British citizen, it was becoming almost impossible to move there. A new hierarchy, which continues in ever more exaggerated forms today, was thus established, in which those with access to Britain were the winners and those without, the losers.

This history is reflected in Jalalgaon today. As mentioned above, of the ninety seven households permanently present in the village (excluding the ‘outsider’ colony inhabitants, who were all landless) thirty four are ‘Londonis’. Another seven households are, using local terminology, classified as ‘Dubai’, meaning that they have had experience of migration to the Gulf states. Of these, three have been moderately successful and own some land. The remaining fifty seven households have no members abroad, and have been classified by us as ‘non-migrant insiders.’ When landholding in the village is correlated to these household types, the results speak for themselves. Of the total agricultural land in Jalalgaon, 79% is owned by Londoni households, 6.9% by ‘Dubai’ households and 13.9 % by non-migrant insiders. Put another way, 100% (34) of Londoni households own land, 50% (6) of Dubai households own it, and 10% (6) of non-migrant insider households own it.

When we examine the amounts of land owned, the figures are even more striking. Of the non-migrant insiders, one household owns five kiare (nearly two acres), and the rest one kiare or less (ie less than 0.3 acres). Amongst the Londoni households, whilst 23.5% own up to one acre and 26.47% own between one to two acres, the rest own over 2 acres, with 23.5 owning over 5 acres.

In sum, migration overseas is matched by the accumulation of land and property, with a clear hierarchy between places. In this, those migrating to Britain have gained a great deal more than those migrating to the Middle East. No household without a direct connection to a foreign place has been able to accumulate much land, and none can afford today's extortionate prices. It is hardly surprising that the aspirations of most young men in the village focus upon going abroad.

**Land, Work and In-Migration to Jalalgaon**

The outwards movement of villagers to Britain and the Middle East has been matched by significant migration of poorer people *into* Jalalgaon in search for alternative livelihoods. As our data shows, the reasons for these movements are varied, and depend in part on the type of migration that has taken place. For some seasonal and permanent labourers, for example, movement to Jalalgaon can be understood as a 'positive' livelihood strategy. Like the seasonal agricultural labourers described by Rogaly et al in West Bengal (Rogaly et al, 2002, 2003 ) or Mosse et al in Western India (2002) movement between places can be interpreted as one strategy amongst others in a range of livelihood options which come into play at particular times of the agricultural season or household development cycle. In other cases movement to Jalalgaon is a response to hunger and deprivation, the result of livelihood failure in the place of origin (see Seeley et al, 2005: 109-124). In addition to these factors, in

order to unravel the complex and continually shifting situation that we found in Jalalgaon, we need to examine Sylheti constructions of status and social mobility, as well as the environmental and economic realities of agricultural production in Sylhet. As we shall see, land, and the way in which it is used, is key.

As noted above, a large proportion of land in Jalalgaon is left fallow over much of the year. There are two interlinked reasons. The first is that landowners can make a great deal more money from land if it is used for colonies, or other forms of property development. The second is that, given the in-puts of labour required and in comparison with the transformative potential of overseas remittances, agriculture is not sufficiently profitable for large scale investment. This is particularly so when land is sharecropped out by absent owners. The effort and ‘hassle’ involved in ensuring that the harvest is divided properly, and that the absent owner not cheated are generally seen as ‘not worth it’ by Londoni owners. If the sharecroppers are related (as they often are: see our data below), tensions may arise if the arrangement goes wrong. Alternately, if the land is cultivated directly, the costs of hiring labour are too high for the enterprise to be profitable. Crucially, cultivating land is locally perceived as a low status occupation, a far cry from the modernity and progress embodied by influential figures such as Mr Miah. Indeed, in Jalalgaon the term *abadi*, which translates as ‘agricultural labourer’ is used only in reference to the lowest status members of the village, the colony dwellers.

Thus, whilst Londoni households may own a great deal of land, its prime purpose is no longer agricultural production. Instead, these households are either located in Britain (and thus earning incomes in Britain) or, if still living in the village, pursue a mixed livelihood in which agriculture (performed either by sharecroppers or hired labour) is only one aspect. For these households, business interests, remittances

from Londoni relatives and wage earning in the Middle East are now of more central importance. It is not however only amongst the more prosperous Londoni households that the retreat from agriculture can be observed. Indeed, 84% of non-migrant insider householders are no longer directly involved in cultivating land, but have moved to other forms of income generation such as selling goods in the bazaar, working as labourers in construction, driving vehicles and so on. This is both because there is more money to be made in these non agricultural pursuits than as agricultural labourers or sharecroppers, and, as our data shows, very few own any land. Of the six non-migrant insider households that do, three sharecrop their fields out for others to cultivate, whilst nine insider non-migrant households (15.7%) sharecrop land in from Londoni relatives.

*In-coming Labourers*

Due to labour shortages caused both by out-migration to the U.K and the Gulf and the general withdrawal of local labour from agriculture there is thus great demand for in-migrant labour in Biswanath. This consists both of permanent labourers, who may also be caretakers of empty Londoni houses, and seasonal labourers, who come to the village at harvest time. Given the constant movements of people in and out of the village, and the seasonal variations, it is not possible to provide hard and fast figures on the total number of labourers in the village. As mentioned above, however, during our fieldwork we counted 169 labourers (*kamla*) in thirty three households. Three of the richest households employed over ten labourers. Of this figure, forty labourers were permanent (defined as being employed for a year or more). Twenty seven of this permanent group were men, and thirteen women. All had arranged with their employers that they would stay for a year or more. The men were paid between

15-20 000 taka a year. Women were paid much less and tended to be employed on a more casual basis, with a monthly wage of 300 taka a month, plus board and lodging being normal. None of the permanent labourers had much bargaining power with their *malik* (employer), but instead had developed quasi-kinship relations with them, often being referred to as *mama* (maternal uncle). As we shall see, these labourers tended to come from areas geographically close to Biswanath.

According to the time of year there are also many other temporary labourers in the village. Some of these come to help with the harvest, and, like the West Bengali agricultural labourers described by Rogaly et al (ibid), are hired in groups by *sadars* (labour gang masters). Others are involved in the construction business, and can be found in the village during the dry months when most houses are built. Our data shows that seasonal labourers can be paid between 80-100 taka a day plus board and lodging, for their work. This compares with around 60 to 70 taka a day in poorer regions. This payment may be supplemented by a small portion of the crop. Construction workers can be paid up to 250 taka a day, depending upon their skills.

Many of the seasonal labourers aim to build up a relationship of trust with employers, and will return to the same household year after year, or even from generation to generation. The majority come from Shunamganj, a low lying and relatively poor region of Greater Sylhet which becomes inundated by water during the wet season, meaning that besides fishing, there is little work. Significantly, it is during this annual inundation that the harvest in Biswanath takes place. During our discussions with this group of labourers, all mentioned the availability of work in Jalalgaon, and favourable terms of employment as the significant factors in their migration. Their employment in the village was just one activity in a diverse range of livelihood strategies: many also owned some land in Shunamganj, or were

sharecroppers. Mobile phones were making a difference too. Now, when the *dhan* (paddy) was ready for harvesting, Biswanath employers could simply call the labourers up. We shall be returning to the terms of employment that temporary labourers working in both construction and agriculture have with their *malik* later in the paper. For now, however, let us turn to the final group of in-migrants in the village, the colony inhabitants.

### *Colony Inhabitants*

Unlike agriculture, in which labour has to be hired and in which the eventual product brings only limited profit, a colony can be immensely profitable to its owner. As one landlord explained, from one kiare of land, one might expect to make 6000 taka in four months, if all the produce was sold. From the same piece of land a twenty room colony would bring 10 000 taka a month. In addition, the colony inhabitants provide a market for local traders. Several businessmen in the village's bazaar told us that they were reliant on selling their goods to colony people. Yet despite their contribution to the local economy, colony inhabitants are generally represented negatively by villagers, who argue that they are 'dirty' and bring crime and deviance to the village. Situated on its periphery, their location makes their classification as 'outsiders' plain.

Over our year's fieldwork, colony households were in constant flux. Just as some people arrived, others would leave, either returning to their home villages, or moving elsewhere in their continual search for livelihood options. During some months some of the smaller colonies would be completely empty. In the harvesting and building seasons, they would fill up again. There was also a wide variety in the background of the inhabitants. In contrast to the agricultural labourers, who

predominantly came from Shunamganj or other nearby regions in Greater Sylhet, the majority came from further a field. Out of the 147 households that were present during our fieldwork, ten came from elsewhere in Biswanath, sixty from Greater Sylhet, and the rest originated from areas from outside Sylhet, such as Mymensingh, Netrokona, Bhoirob, Comilla and Barishal. The majority had moved due to calamities and poverty in their 'sending' areas. Our survey data shows that 'push' factors, such as hunger (58.5%), flooding (5.4%), indebtedness (8.2%) and family conflict (5.4%) were the major reasons for moving, whilst 'wanting a better life' was only given as the main reason by 15.6% of our informants. These categories are of course not exclusive. They also reflect the shocks experienced by individual households (caused, for example, by the death of a wage earner, or sudden land loss) as well as the long term, or seasonal deprivation experienced in some regions of Bangladesh, where seasonal variations in agricultural production contribute to what is known as '*monga*' (seasonal famine, usually occurring from September to October.)

Just as the majority of colony inhabitants have moved due to shocks or long term livelihood failure in the impoverished areas from which they have come, most have arrived in the village with few existing social links. This contrasts directly with the permanent labourers, whose in-migration is part of a long term strategy in which village of origin livelihoods are supplemented by periodic movement into Biswanath, and the forging of on-going social relationships with their Biswanath patrons. We found that out of 147 colony households, 36 (24%) came to Jalalgaon with no previous links to the village. Others had links with neighbours or relatives already living in a colony, but none had real or fictive links with village 'insiders'. Once living in Jalalgaon, the men follow a variety of occupations, including pulling



rickshaws, working as day labourers, driving ‘vans’, or working as petty traders.  
Women largely work as servants or petty traders.

To assume that these households reside ‘permanently’ in Jalalgao would be a mistake. Instead, people move in and out of the village according to necessity and their links with their home villages remain strong. Indeed, nearly all the colony residents told us that they attempted to keep in contact with their relatives in their villages of origin, with 38% reporting to us that they return ‘frequently’. For these people it would seem that it is their villages of origin rather than Biswanath that provide informal social protection. Some people return annually to their home villages for two or three months. Others return every few years. Others use the economic opportunities available in Jalalgaon as a cushion for the habitual shocks that they face in their home areas, and only come to the colonies during periods of acute scarcity. Only those escaping debt are less likely to return.

For many of the colony inhabitants migration is therefore a short, or longer term strategy to escape destitution in other parts of Bangladesh. To this extent wealthy Londoni villages can be said to act as ‘safety nets’ for the poor in other, less prosperous parts of Bangladesh, providing economic opportunities and shelter for them when times become particularly hard. Their movement into Biswanath is, in turn, combined with constant efforts to maintain social resources in the areas from which they have come, for, as we shall see, the informal social protection offered from insider Jalalgaon households is of a limited nature.

**Livelihoods on the Move: Spatial Survival Strategies**

In sum, Jalalgaon is in a process of rapid transformation and flux. Unlike the stable villages conjured up in classical South Asian ethnography (14), people are

highly mobile. Few live only in one location, and the vast majority depend, in one way or another, upon a place other than their 'home' for their livelihood. Movement across space is a central livelihood strategy, whether this involves migration to the U.K or the Gulf, or from a poorer part of Bangladesh to the colonies of Biswanath. Indeed, for both the sons of village insiders who hope to get to Britain through marriage to a British bride, or to the labourers that work on their land, movement is perceived as one of the only options. This constant search for new destinations means that relationships between places are constantly changing. For example, recent research in Comilla shows that whilst a generation earlier men migrated periodically into Sylhet to work as labourers, today it is the Gulf which provides an alternative livelihood option: a movement which involves more risk and, potentially, higher returns (Rasheed, 2007). Instead, in-migrants to the area increasingly come from the North East of Bangladesh, where seasonal productive shortfalls have led to regular *monga* (seasonal famine).

As we have also seen, places are hierarchically arranged, at both global and national levels and access to these different places is central for the construction of status and economic hierarchy. In this hierarchy, 'London' and other countries in the 'West' are at the top, followed by 'Dubai'. After this comes Biswanath, then other areas of Greater Sylhet (for example, Shunamganj). At the bottom are places outside Sylhet, which (like the international destinations at the top) might be thought of by village insiders as *bidesh* (far away, foreign). Crucially, peoples' relationships to these various places are vital for their relative security and / or vulnerability. In essence, the more one is able to access the places higher up the hierarchy, the greater the degree of social protection available and the greater the livelihood options. For Londonis with British citizenship, their permanent access to the U.K brings the formal

social protection of welfare benefits and pensions, plus considerable employment and business opportunities (which I do not define as ‘social protection’). Meanwhile their ‘left-behind’ relatives seek to forge direct relationships with the U.K through the arrangement of their sons and daughters’ marriages with British brides and grooms, whilst also maintaining the relationships with their Londoni patrons to whom many are dependent upon for help in times of crisis. Place and social protection are thus inextricably linked.

Access to place is, however, mediated by one’s relationship to others, as measured by degrees of separation. In what follows I shall return to the central theme of the paper: the care and ‘help’ provided by the rich to different groups of ‘poor’ in Jalalgaon.

**Our Own Kin: ideologies of care and protection in Jalalgaon**

Informal social protection in Biswanath is directly related to ideologies of relatedness and obligation common to Bangladesh. At the most general level all Bengali Muslims are subject to ideals of *Jakat*, the duty of care to the poor, as expressed through distributions of ritually slaughtered meat on holy days, funerals or other ritual occasions. Importantly, this injunction to charity stresses that first and foremost one should give alms to one’s ‘own poor’. During a Londoni’s trip back to their home village, for example, he or she would first and foremost be expected to provide ‘help’ for those in their lineage, followed by others who are more loosely related, and then, finally, by charity to unconnected poor people, or beggars. Indeed, beggars (*fakir*) who move from house to house in search of alms are usually rewarded by a small bowl of husked rice.

From this level of charity, in which there need be no direct relationship with recipients, obligations to provide help increase according to the closeness of the connection. Whilst in some instances this may be measured in terms of actual kinship relationships, in others, degrees of relatedness are constructed over time and calculated according to where it is that people originate from. One's relationship to place, as well as who one knows (the two are inextricably linked) are therefore vital social resources in accessing forms of protection and livelihoods that are key for survival amongst the poor. To explain this in more detail, let us turn to the dynamics of relatedness in Sylhet, and in particular, to the household development cycle.

As documented elsewhere, social norms in rural Bangladesh stress one's obligations and duty to kin (Gardner, 1995). Whilst stereotypically described as a 'patrilineal' society (Aziz, 1979) in reality these obligations are also reckoned matrilineally. Although women move to their husbands' households at marriage and in principle have duties first and foremost to their in-laws, in practice, both men and women tend to remain in close contact with maternal kin and, in extremis are also morally obliged to help them. This sense of obligation also extends to the larger *gusti* (patrilineage), many of whom would normally be living in the same village, or nearby. Whilst the number of specific kinship terms in use in the Sylhet region indicates a precise reckoning of kinship relationships, after a few degrees of separation, the actual link to a relative may become somewhat vague. Distant cousins are simply known as '*sassa-to-bai*', and one's father's many cousins as '*sassa*'. What matters is that these relatives are members of one's father's or mother's *gusti*, and are thus 'our own kin'.

Despite the success of the vast majority of Londoni households in accumulating wealth and status in Bangladesh, not all members of the *gustis* from which the migrants came shared this good fortune. My work in Talukpur (1995)

clearly showed that in the earlier decades of migration to the U.K, there were both winners and losers within the same *gusti*, for not all the men of each *gusti* or household, went abroad. Differences in household organisation, individual preference or the amount of capital available for funding a young man to migrate, as well as in degrees of separation from the migration chain, meant that certain sections of lineages tended to send more migrants than others. The rapid accumulation of wealth into the hands of Londonis means that today there can be striking differences in wealth amongst different households within the same *gusti*. In Talukpur, for example, across the fields from the stone house of a *bari* of four brothers, of whom three went to Britain in the 1960s, is the dilapidated thatch house of distant cousins who survive through casual labour, begging, and the *shahajo* of their wealthy Londoni kin. Unlike the majority of the *gusti*, these cousins never migrated to the U.K. Today they own no land or assets and survive off the wage labour of their brothers. Another distant cousin, who was married to a *Londoni* who was killed in Britain the early 1970s lives in abject poverty with her divorced daughter on the other side of the river. For her, as well as her cousins across the fields, survival depends upon the degree to which she can claim *shahajo* from her Londoni relatives.

Combined with the varied histories of upwards and downwards mobility of different sections of *gustis*, there may be significant economic differences within *baris*. In general all *baris* originated from one household, in which brothers lived together with their parents and their income, labour and assets were pooled. At the death of parents, households are normally divided both physically through the construction of a bamboo wall, and economically, by a division of whatever land and assets were originally held jointly. Thus, if their parents have died, British based

brothers and their children have no immediate obligation to support their Bangladesh based siblings, since their households are now separate units.

From this brief description of differentiation within *gustis* and *baris*, let us return to the question of the types of help given to different categories of people within Jalalgaon and Talukpur.

### Support Given to Kin

Our research indicates that migrants who have settled in Britain and elsewhere only send regular remittances to their own households (wives and children, or parents) (15). Once households are divided close relatives such as brothers, sisters and direct nephews and nieces of both matrilineal and patrilineal reckoning are 'helped' if and when particular needs arise and according the circumstances of the Londoni relatives. Wedding costs, setting up a business, or overseas migration usually take place with the help of Londoni kin. Out of sixteen men involved in small businesses in the Biswanath area that we interviewed, ten mentioned that they had been assisted in setting up their businesses (usually shops) by close relatives settled in Britain. Whilst in some cases the relatives were brothers, in others they were uncles (both paternal and maternal). Of the many young men in Jalalgaon who were hoping to go abroad, all anticipated the assistance of close relatives already in Britain in organising marriages with British Bangladeshi brides. In another case, Mrs Julkekha explained to us how when her father died, her mother and sisters were taken by her maternal uncle to his home in Jalagaon. Another uncle was already established in Britain. He arranged his sister's daughters' marriages, and when he had built himself and his brothers a new house from his British earnings, gave his sister the older one to live in. He also arranged for Mrs Julkekha's brother to migrate to the Middle East, and still

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sends money to his sister and her daughters. As the above examples indicate, access to foreign countries usually comes through relationships with Londonis, whether through arranging a marriage in Britain or funding migration the the Gulf. For those planning to go to ‘Dubai’ loans or ‘help’ from Londoni relatives are often key to financing the journey and the ‘papers’ involved (16).

In addition to the input of capital for migration or business projects, some people in Jalalgaon who are related to Londonis sharecrop their land. Unlike other parts of Bangladesh, where sharecropping arrangements are strictly adhered to (17) in Biswanath this is not the case. Instead, relatives may keep most of the harvest, or be given some fields to grow vegetables on; strict accounting is not usual. Besides these sharecropping arrangements, we have documented numerous examples of Londoni kin ‘helping’ members of their lineages back in Jalalgaon. This help involves sending money, helping to build or repair houses, sending assistance if a household member falls ill or dies, in times of flood, and for wedding expenses.

Such ‘help’ is not confined only to closer members of the *gusti* but may spill out to other, more distantly related poor households, and, as we saw in the opening paragraphs of this paper, include those who are not related at all. Significantly, the obligation to give such help, and the form that it takes, becomes increasingly diffuse with the waning strength of the kinship connection. The following cases show the extent to which poorer, non-migrant ‘insiders’ in Jalalgaon are helped by their Londoni kin. As the second case illustrates, many believe that this help will eventually involve them being ‘brought’ to the U.K, a dream which in reality is unlikely to materialise.

Mr. 'T' is a day labourer with his wife, two daughters and one son. His uncle, cousins and other lineage members live in London. He told us: "We are supported by our Londoni relatives. The house where we live was bought by my uncle. Last year, it was badly damaged by a flood, so they helped rebuild it. Basically they couldn't stand seeing our miserable condition. This year, they visited us and asked to me not to work as a labourer anymore. My uncle advised me to start a business and promised he'd send money once he got back to London. We are also supported by other rich people in the village. For example, the formal UP chairman, who is not my relative anyway, has sharecropped out some land to me, but doesn't claim his share.

Mr Shah told us:

My brother, uncle and cousins live in London. I sharecrop my uncle's land which is approximately ten kiare (1 kiare = 0.3 acres). My uncle lets me keep the produce. Whenever I need help, my Londoni relatives give it. For example, they've built me a shed for my 40 ducks. My cousin who lives in London, has promised to pay for my kids' schooling. He's also promised that one day he'll bring them to London.

Whilst we might interpret this 'help' as a form of 'informal social protection', it is also important to analyse how it is embedded within local power relations. Wood is correct in stating that there is a sense of duty amongst richer people to offer assistance to the poor, and that to be labelled 'uncaring' carries social stigma within rural Bangladesh (2005: 13-14). But as he also makes clear, these reciprocal relationships are not weighted equally. In Talukpur 'our own poor' were prevented



from falling into absolute destitution by their richer relatives, but were also treated as a source of labour whenever need arose and in which the terms of employment were very much dictated by the richer relatives. For example in Talukpur, poor (ie landless and non-migrant) female cousins might be called upon to come to the *bari* of their richer relatives to help with housework if there were extra guests to feed. They would not be classified as *boa beti* (housemaids) for this would be to infer low status, but instead would describe their work as ‘helping out’. In return they might get a meal, or a small amount of *chaal* (husked rice). First in line for charitable handouts, these women are dependent upon the maintenance of good relations with their better off relatives, and will go to lengths to ensure that no-one forgets that they are members of the same *gusti*. All exchanges, whether of labour or goods, are glossed as ‘help’. Within ideologies of kinship and the support due to relatives, the terms cannot, therefore, be negotiated or challenged.

In Jalalgaon it is common to find poorer relatives acting as caretakers for the empty houses of absent Londonis. The role of caretaker is higher status than working as a *kamla* (permanent labourer, see below) and also brings a (well built) roof over one’s head. It can, however, lead to problems if the property is damaged or when the Londonis return to the village and want their caretaker kin to move out. Increasingly Londonis are therefore employing outsider caretakers, with whom they have a strictly business relationship. As this indicates, whilst kinship may bring a degree of informal social protection it also prevents the content of the reciprocity from being contested.

The relationship may also change and support be withdrawn. Indeed, the closeness and warmth of transnational relationships is often hard to maintain over time, with resentments building up on either side. British based kin may complain of the constant demands on them by their *deshi* relatives, who imagine they have

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limitless funds, whilst those in the *desh* feel neglected and are largely unaware of the economic pressures on those settled in Britain. Quarrels over property, or the arrangement of marriages are not uncommon. Mr Mohabat, a Biswanath businessman, told us how his household had fallen out with his British based uncle and aunt over the arrangement of a marriage between his brother and his British cousin. Whilst he and his brothers were keen for the marriage to take place, both the aunt and her daughter resisted the alliance, arguing that a Sylheti groom would not be suitable for a British born girl. Allegations of the misappropriation of money quickly followed and today the British based wing of the family no longer sends any form of support.

Whilst relatedness brings informal social protection for poorer non-migrant village insiders, this therefore also involves unequal relationships of dependency. To understand the meanings this has for in-migrants to Jalalgaon, let us turn to the various categories of labourers in the village.

### Connectedness, Place and Patronage: In-migrants in Jalalgaon

#### *Permanent Labourers*

In Jalalgaon patronage is produced by degrees of geographical connectedness, as well as through kinship. As already indicated, just over half the forty permanent labourers (*kamla*) living in Jalalgaon come from areas within Greater Sylhet. Of these, fifteen originate from Jalalgaon or villages adjacent to it. Eight come from Shunaganj, a poorer, non Londoni area of Sylhet which has for many generations supplied Biswanath with labour, and two from another Sylheti district called Chatak. The remaining fifteen come from areas such as Noakhali, Comilla and Mymensingh (other districts in Bangladesh, outside Greater Sylhet). Villagers told us that they prefer to hire labourers from inside Greater Sylhet for these people are 'more honest'; since

permanent labourers may work for one's family for many years, it is important that relationships of trust develop. Besides working in the fields, permanent labourers may also have major responsibilities in managing land and other property, feeding domestic animals, shopping and so on. Female *kamla* also work permanently within some households, doing domestic labour, or, in some cases, managing empty properties as caretakers.

The relationship between permanent labourers and their employers contain many elements of patron-clientism. Male *kamla* for example, are often referred to in kinship terms as *mama* (maternal uncle) by household children or *biye* (brother) by adults. Although they are paid an annual wage which is high in comparison to other districts in Bangladesh, the rate is not in the first instance negotiable: employers decide what to give according to how pleased they were with the labourers' work. Only after he has been working for a household for a number of years might a *kamla* feel able to ask for a wage rise. In contrast, the women we interviewed reported that they did not know how much they would be paid until the wage was given, and would not speak to their employers directly about remuneration.

In return for their on-going honesty and work, permanent *kamla* can expect a degree of protection from their employers. If sick, for example, they may be given treatment and time off, and would be allowed to return home for holidays or during a family crisis. Their employer might also give them loans or other forms of financial support. None of these exchanges are formalised in a contract. Instead, they are the 'expected' benefits of permanent employment. In the following examples, we can see how permanent *kamla* develop patron-client relations with their employers over time and thus are subject to variable levels of informal social protection. As Rumon Ali's case also shows, geographical links can produce kinship, or at least, strengthen his

claims to kinship with his patron. **Rumon Ali** has been working in Jalalgaon as a permanent labourer for the last twenty years. In the house where he works, most but not all of the members are in Britain. Whilst originally he worked in the fields, land is now sharecropped out so he is mostly involved with the management of the empty house and overseeing the sharecrop arrangement. As he told us:

*My salary is not fixed, but I receive about 20 000 taka a year. Whenever I need help from my employers, I get it from them. I never ask about my salary. When I was first working here I used to get about 8-10 000 taka, but over time my wages have gone up. So I don't bargain. It is up to the employers to fix the rate. If I want to go back to Golopganj, I can go, but first I have to make sure that there's someone to look after Mama (ie Uncle) Assador's house, as I can't leave it empty. Sometimes I help in the telephone shop owned by him. Uncle got married in Golopganj recently, so he's now my kin.*

Clearly, not only is Rumon Ali keen to create kinship with his employer, but he is also wary of disrupting the amiability of the relationship by negotiating directly for his wages, and thus 'never asks' about his salary. Yet whilst his relationship with his 'uncle' provides him with some degree of insurance against sickness or other crises, it is always provisional, and always reliant upon the good will of his 'uncle'. As the next example indicates, if one's patron dies and good relationships have not been forged with their descendents, the support that they provided goes with them.

*Mrs Parol was working as the caretaker of a Londoni's house. Her employer had agreed that he would provide for all her needs so long as she acted as his*

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*caretaker. He had even agreed to bring her to London. But on his death, this agreement has become blurred. Her employer's sons and daughters treat her simply as servant, and she can no longer use the facilities in the house that were once hers. The management of land, which was once done by her, has now been taken over by her deceased employer's grandson.*

***Temporary and Seasonal Labourers***

Like permanent labourers, some temporary labourers develop long term relationships with employers who they return to year after year. Indeed, some landowners in Jalagaon have been employing season labour from the same family for generations. Their high wages reflect the high demand for agricultural labour in Biswanath as well as the desire of employers to retain honest, reliable and skilled employees. For example, Mr Farid, a tractor driver from Shunamgaj, described to us how, when he was taken ill only a few weeks into a new job, his employer paid for him to visit the doctor and gave him two weeks off. He also allows him to return regularly to Shunmganj to cultivate his own land. Other temporary labourers described to us the high wages to be found in Londoni areas of Sylhet. These can be up to 3000 taka a month, plus cigarettes, food and lodging (compared to rates of up to 1800 taka a month in Golapganj)

Other labourers are more mobile, moving between their home villages and a variety of destinations in the region in search of employment. Balancing the demands of cultivating their own land in Shunamganj with seasonal fluctuations in demand for labour in Londoni areas, some described to us a degree of bargaining less common amongst permanent labourers for whom ongoing and positive relationships with their employers are more important. As one seasonal labourer, Mr Ajom told us:

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6 *Last year the malik was so pleased with my work that he asked me to return*  
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8 *the following year. This year, I was just getting to his house when I met a*  
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10 *woman who dragged me into her bari and asked me to work for her. I told her*  
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12 *that I was already committed. She said she badly needed someone, and offered*  
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14 *me a rate of 80 taka a day. I told her I'd only do it for 100 taka, and she*  
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16 *agreed, so I went with her.*  
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22 Both agricultural and construction labourers told us that they had never had  
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24 problems finding work, and in cases such as the one cited above, could negotiate  
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26 higher wages with employers desperate to find labour at harvest time. In Jalalgaon,  
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28 the harvest is now completely dependent upon outside labour. During this season in  
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30 the winter of 2004-5, about sixty agricultural labourers moved into the village. Most  
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32 were accommodated by their employers and given three meals a day, plus cigarettes.  
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34 In addition their wages were often 100 taka a day (in comparison with 60-70  
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39 elsewhere).  
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41 Other seasonal or temporary migrants have less attractive terms of  
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43 employment. Our research indicates that when migrants come from further a field (ie  
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45 outside Greater Sylhet) their bargaining power has an inverse relationship with the  
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47 distance they've travelled. The poorest in-migrants cannot afford to pay their fares to  
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49 Sylhet, and so are reliant upon middle men to organise their transport and  
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51 employment. Many of these labourers are escaping *Manga* (seasonal hunger) in the  
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53 poorest parts of Bangladesh. Attracted by the availability of employment and tales of  
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55 the generosity of Sylheti employers, migration is one of the few options open to them.  
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The following case illustrates differences in the types and terms of employment on offer, as well as the vulnerability of the poorest to exploitation.

*Sobor Ali is 33 and comes from Golapganj, in North West Bangladesh. He told us : ‘All people in Sylhet are polite and rich. They have a shortage of labour so there are plenty of opportunities to find work there. I met up with Habil, an agent, (sadar) who arranges for people to go there. I went with thirty other labourers to work in a brickfield. We went in a very crowded bus from Hatibanda to Dhaka. Habil Sadar managed all the costs of the trip. After that we caught another bus to Sylhet, Then we were sent to GM brickfield. We were supposed to get 10 -15 000 taka for our work, but the sadar actually only gave us 6000. He now owes me about 20 000 taka, but when I ask him for it he just tells me to come back later*

Here, the lack of social relations between employer and employee means that informal social protection is not available for workers such as Sobor Ali, and nor do they have any means of address if cheated. Within this context, the advantages of establishing long term relationships with employers are obvious, even if this means that wages and other benefits cannot be directly bargained for.

**Colony Residents**

As described above, people who live in the colonies of Jalalgaon are perceived by villagers as ‘outsiders’, most definitely not ‘our own poor’. As we have seen, over half have come from outside Greater Sylhet and none have kinship links with village ‘insiders’, despite at least twenty four household heads (out of 147 households)

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3 having lived in the village for over twenty years. Instead, they have either come to  
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5 the village through links with other people living in the colonies, or without any  
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7 immediate links, having heard of the availability of work and housing on the  
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9 grapevine. Just as the colony residents have not forged kinship links with ‘insider’  
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11 villagers, nor have they tended to develop long standing patron client relations with  
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13 them. Thus, whilst they may receive the spontaneous charity of returning Londonis, or  
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15 benefit from the distribution of meat or other foods during ritual events, they cannot  
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17 rely in other ways upon the informal social protection provided by Londoni families.  
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22 One of the reasons for their lack of social links with the rest of the village, and  
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24 hence, the absence of informal social protection, is that most are not employed  
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26 directly by insider households. Instead, the majority work as rickshaw pullers, van  
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28 drivers, peddlers of cheap consumer goods or snacks, and casual day labourers. Of the  
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30 nine women who work as servants only two are employed by village ‘insider’  
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32 households; the remainder work in the households of single men living in the colonies.  
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34 To this extent, whilst integrated into the local economy through the employment  
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36 opportunities in the informal sector provided by the ‘Londoni boom’, residents in the  
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38 colony are not socially integrated into the village.  
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43 The following cases illustrate the complex mixture of factors which lead  
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45 people to migrate into Jalalgaon’s colonies, as well as the opportunities they find  
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47 when they arrive. As they indicate, processes of ‘chain migration’ are often important.  
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49 In both cases, employment opportunities in Jalalgaon have prevented our informants  
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51 from falling into total destitution. Besides the generalised charity of Londonis,  
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53 however, any informal social protection that the majority receive is given by other  
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55 residents in the colony rather than village ‘insiders’.  
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***Amena (from Kishorganj; near Mymensingh)***

*I came to Biswanath about twelve years ago. When I was in my home village, two of my daughters came here with their in-laws. When my husband died, my daughters brought me here. The main reason we came was for work. At home we originally had quite a lot of land. But then my husband suddenly became paralysed. My sons weren't grown up then, so it was a real struggle. When it was time to marry my daughters, we had to sell most of the land. We have a relative who lives in Biswanath and drives a rickshaw there. He suggested that my daughters and their husbands came here to get work, so they did. I was having a terrible time in Kishorganj: whenever my daughters could manage it, they'd send me money, otherwise I'd have starved. In the end I came here too. Now both my daughters work as cooks, earning about 100 taka a day. If they're involved in preparing food for weddings, they can earn a great deal more.*

***Asya (from Habiganj, in Greater Sylhet)***

*Soon after the terrible floods of 1988, both of my parents died. My older siblings were married, but I was very young and went to live with my older sister. When I was older she arranged for me to marry a man from Habiganj. We were doing well. He was a building contractor, and brought us a house to live in Sylhet. But then he got ill with TB. We had to sell the house to treat him. When he eventually died I was pregnant with my second child and had only sixty taka to my name. So I came to Biswanath, where I lived with a woman I knew (in the colonies). I began to beg, and also to work as a servant in different houses, earning about two or three hundred taka a month. I moved*

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3 *around, from house to house. Eventually I found work with a midwife and*  
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5 *learned from her how to carry out deliveries. So I live by doing that.*  
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### 10 11 12 **Place, Relatedness and Informal Social Protection : Concluding Remarks** 13 14

15 As this paper has shown, practices and meanings of ‘informal social  
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17 protection’ need to be carefully contextualised, as do their relationship with different  
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19 forms of migration (cf. Sabates-Wheeler and Waite, 2003). In Biswanath the ‘help’  
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21 that poor households get from wealthier and more powerful Londonis depends upon  
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23 degrees of relatedness, measured both through kinship and geography. It is thus not  
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25 possible to discuss either the ‘effects’ of Londoni migration on the local poor, or the  
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27 relationship between informal social protection and migration, without careful  
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29 consideration of *who* the local poor are.  
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34 As I have also suggested, the term ‘informal social protection’ has to be  
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36 understood as exactly that: the informal (and sometimes unpredictable) protection  
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38 against ‘shocks’ and disasters that people gain from their social relationships, rather  
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40 than the economic possibilities created by the ‘boom’ of overseas migration.  
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42 Movement across space (migration) is one of the few ways that people can boost their  
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44 incomes; for the very poor it can be a crucial survival strategy. Yet whilst migration  
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46 can be understood as providing an economic ‘net’ in providing alternative livelihood  
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48 options for the poor, it is not movement per se which provides social protection, but  
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50 the relationships that are formed in particular places as the result of movement, be  
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52 these with the British state, or with wealthy and well connected patrons in Londoni  
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54 villages. In this, I depart from Sabates-Wheeler and Waite, who suggest that  
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56 migration itself can be understood as a form of social protection (2003).  
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As the paper also shows, relations of informal social protection are tied to particular moralities of care and support. In Sylhet the *shahajo* of the rich is part of a morality which decrees that people have particular kinds of obligations to each other, depending upon how closely they are related, usually through consanguinal or affinal links. These relationships are not fixed but apt to change over time: they can be both made and unmade. Whilst marriages and good will on both sides of the transnational community may create or reproduce relatedness, so can relations be ruptured and the ‘help’ suddenly cease. For incomers to Jalalgaon, becoming ‘our own poor’ is highly processual. If a labourer lives and works in a household for long enough, they may be able to construct quasi kinship relations and obtain a degree of patronage from the wealthy. This is particularly the case when the incomer is from Greater Sylhet rather than somewhere outside the region, for relatedness is at least partially geographically defined: ‘our own poor’ are those from the *desh*. For the most vulnerable, their connectedness to locations at the bottom of the hierarchy of places and absence of social links with Londonis means that whilst they may enjoy the higher wages and employment opportunities available in the area, the assistance they gain from the rich is confined to ritual distributions at funerals or Eid, alms and, possibly, emergency hand outs in times of regional crisis such as catastrophic flooding.

For everyone, what matters most in securing a prosperous and secure livelihood is access to economically vibrant places, or rather, to the social relations, networks and income earning opportunities that exist there. This access is mediated by one’s relationships to others. Just as the sons of village insiders wait for the chance to migrate to Britain, hoping that their absent Londoni kin will help them to arrange a marriage to a British bride or groom, so do others use the loans of their patrons to fund labour migration to the Gulf. For migrants from poor regions such as

Shunamganj, building up relationships with particular employers means that they have continued access to the wages and work available in Biswanath. For those without such links, who have to move into the area via an agent, or who work in the informal economy but are not employed within the households of Londonis, their relationship to Biswanath remains provisional.

What will happen in the future? Evidence from elsewhere in South Asia indicates that traditional patron-clientage is breaking down in the face of migration, industrialisation and so on (Kabeer, 2002). Our case appears to show the reverse, at least for the time being. Absent Londonis are dependent upon labourers and poorer relatives to look after their property, thus maintaining their stake in the homeland. They therefore willingly encourage clientism, sending financial assistance as well as promises to 'help' with further migration. For those who have become wealthy in Britain, their duty to 'their own poor' appears to be as strong as ever. Witness Mr Miah and his generous contributions in providing charitable hand-outs, an act that is repeated many times over in Londoni areas, whenever British based migrants return. Arguably, villages such as Jalalgaon have become dependent upon their largess.

Yet whilst for now the dependency between Londonis and those they 'help' would appear to be symbiotic, it is those with secure access to Britain who ultimately hold the power. In the Biswanath case we see how the global relations of economic and political inequality described by theorists such as Immanuel Wallerstein (1979, 2004) articulate with kinship and morality at the local level. What one might analyse as the dependency of Bangladesh on the international labour market is reproduced through the dependency of the 'left-behinds' on their Londoni relatives.

No relationships are static, however, and nor are the moralities which underpin them. This means that over time the relationships described in this paper are bound to

change. As indicated in my account, the transnational relationship between Britain and Sylhet is not without its tensions. Indeed, whilst first generation British migrants are generally still orientated towards Sylhet, the interest of their children and their grandchildren in remaining wealthy patrons to a community of dependent relatives is less certain. Whilst transnational links remain active, our research shows how Londoni villages provide a safety net of economic support and employment opportunities for poorer people both from inside and outside the village, albeit in different ways. If the links between Bangladeshis in Britain and Biswanath start to fade, I fear this net will rapidly develop gaping holes.

End Notes

<sup>1</sup> £1 = 120 taka (in October 2006)

<sup>2</sup> There are no state sponsored relief programmes in Biswanath. The NGOs BRAC and CARE work in the area, with a focus on literacy rather than credit programmes.

<sup>3</sup> For a critique of social capital theory with reference to Bangladesh, see Wood, 2005; more generally, see Fine 2001

<sup>4</sup> These vertical relationships are often cross cut by kinship links; as has been widely observed, in rural Bangladesh, a classical Marxist analysis of class relations is not possible (Jahangir, 1979)

<sup>5</sup> The project was funded by Dfid’s DRC in Migration, Poverty and Globalisation (held at the University of Sussex).

6. Much of the fieldwork was carried out by Rushida Rawnek Khan and Abdul Mannan. Methods included surveys, structured and unstructured interviews,

participant observation and focus group discussions. Additional research was also carried out in Biswanath Town and Sylhet Town.

7. Bangladesh government has banned women from certain categories of labour migration. They therefore officially only make up 1% of this figure (Sidiqui, 2003)

8. The 2001 Census enumerated a total population of 283,063<sup>8</sup> of which 38% were under sixteen. Fifty four percent Bangladeshis lived in London

(<http://www.statistics.gov.uk>) and nearly half of these are situated in Tower Hamlets where they form over quarter of the resident population (in some areas within the borough, this figure is higher).

9. Cf. Vertovec, 1999, 2004 and Grillo, 2007, for a review of the transnational literature.

10. For detailed information concerning the options for Bangladeshi migrants to the U.K see McPhee, 2006

<sup>11</sup>. Unfortunately the FO were not able to provide data for previous years.

12. *Control of Immigration Statistics*

13. Today in Jalalgaon purchasers can expect to pay between one to three million taka for one kiare (approximately 0.3 acres). In one case a Londoni brought two kiare of prime building land for ten million taka (approx £82, 659). This is comparable to prices one might expect to pay for the centre of Dhaka, and more expensive than Sylhet Town. In other districts of Bangladesh, an acre of land (around three kiare) would cost between 80,000 – 100, 000 taka (approximately £826).

14. See Inden's '*Imagining India*' for a critique of the anthropological construct of the stable Indian village (1990)

15. It should be noted that remittances are an extremely sensitive topic and obtaining data on them difficult. Our observations are thus not based on ‘hard’ quantitative data but on what informants were willing to divulge.

16. Our research in both Talukpur and Jalalgao shows, a high proportion of would be migrants to the Middle East are unsuccessful, either losing their money to fraudulent agents, entering the countries illegally and being deported, or failing to find enough work to repay the initial costs of the papers. In Jalalgao, out of six ‘Dubai’ households, three had suffered a net loss in land and assets after their attempts to migrate.

17. Normally this would involve all inputs being provided by the sharecropper, and the harvest divided equally between sharecropper and owner

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